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Concepts of youth

Jean Spence

In everyday life and language, the concept of 'youth' is associated in a common-sense manner with the state of being young, particularly with that phase of life between childhood and adulthood. Sometimes the word 'youth' is used interchangeably with 'young person'. It appears to mean the same thing. Yet with the plural, 'youths', the meaning broadens. 'Youths' is a word carrying a great deal of baggage. That baggage includes ideas about unruly young people, often male, operating in groups, and at the very least, being a nuisance on the streets. The concept of youth is therefore not a neutral description of young people, though it is often used as though it were. When it is not used critically and carefully it brings with it mainly negative assumptions about the behaviour and character of young people both as individuals and in groups.

Being young relates to a natural biological phase in the life cycle associated with the growth from childhood to adulthood. The concept of youth is connected with this biological state, but it is also connected with society. It has *social* as well as *biological* meaning. People grow within a particular social context and young people occupy particular places within any given society. The experiences of being young and the meanings attached to 'youth' are derived directly from the social and economic positions occupied by young people as much as from their biological development. In this sense the meaning of youth, the 'baggage' which it carries, shifts and changes in time and place. Being young in the past was experienced and understood differently from being young today. By the same token, being young in one part of the world carries different implications from being young in another. Thus youth as a social concept has both *historical* and *spatial* dimensions.

Within time and place, any given society is structured in such a way that individuals and groups occupy different social positions and take different social roles. Usually social structures reflect the distribution of wealth and power and this distribution affects different groups unequally. In relation to youth, being a young prince brings with it an entirely different status and identity, different social behaviour and different expectations and opportunities from being a working class young man earning a minimum wage in a hotel kitchen. Therefore, even though it is possible to identify some common biological characteristics of being young, there is no one universal set of meanings into which all young people can fit. The concept of 'youth' is a generalisation which cannot be taken to represent the complex experiences of being young in any given situation.

Nevertheless the meanings attached to the concept of youth, and the way in which the term is commonly used, do say something about dominant attitudes towards young people. These, in turn affect the way in which young people in general are perceived and treated. Youth is itself a group affected by different access to wealth and resources. This is partly related to legal age barriers which define access to social opportunities such as voting, employment and welfare and housing benefits and partly related to the notion that youth is a period of 'learning', 'apprenticeship', 'training' to become adult.

The concept of youth is one which ultimately suggests similarity amongst people of a similar age and this concept is used as the basis for creating social rules and institutions which reinforce the similarities. This affects the way in which young people interpret and understand what it is to be young. 'Youth' is therefore a real social as well as biological experience. However, because at the same time, the reality of life for different individuals and different groups of young people is different according to questions of wealth or power defined by different categories such as class, gender or citizenship status, then there can be no universal experience of youth. Understanding something of the complex relationship between the idea or concept of youth and the different realities of young peoples' lives can inform our understanding of the world which different young people inhabit.

Contemporary ideas

In contemporary Britain, youth is often categorised as an unstable period of life between childhood and adulthood. Since the second world war, various social theorists (e.g. Eisenstadt, 1956) have described the period between childhood and adulthood as one of 'transition', but this description has not always been dominant. It came to be important as a means of understanding youth particularly during the 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Wallace and Cross, 1990;

Irwin, 1995) and has continued to influence government decision-making into the twenty first century (e.g. DfES, 2001).

'Transition' suggests a journey from one state to another. In relation to youth, it depends upon the idea that childhood and adulthood are distinct conditions, that there is something fundamentally different between the condition of childhood and the condition of adulthood. The personal aspects of transition are associated with biological maturity while the social aspects are associated with the movement from dependence to independence. The personal aspects involve the movement through puberty and adolescence towards sexual, emotional and intellectual maturity. The social aspects involve changing relationships with social institutions, in particular those concerned with family, education, work and leisure. These institutions must be successfully navigated by the individual in order to achieve the full and responsible adult maturity which is associated with citizenship in a democratic society.

In relation to the notion of transition, youth is perceived as an unusually intense and 'risky' period of life. When the transitions are not made successfully, there is trouble both for the individual and for society. For example, those who refuse schooling in early youth are less likely to access training and employment in later youth and therefore more likely to become poor as they fail to make a successful transition to the waged labour which would bring adult independence and responsibility. Because of this, policy makers stress the importance of education and training in the lives of young people (Hollands, 1990). As society becomes more complex, and the skills required of its citizens ever more sophisticated and diverse, so the age of social maturity expands upwards. Meanwhile improved nutrition and childhood health have been accompanied by a decline in the age of biological maturity, of puberty. Thus the period defined as 'youth', becomes ever longer and the journey fraught with ever more danger and risk.

Not only are the age related boundaries of youth expanding, but also youth is increasingly understood as a process of *becoming*, of apprenticeship and preparation for adulthood. The outcome of independent citizenship is stressed as the goal of youth and young people are directed by social opinion and policy to spend their youth working towards this goal. When they fail or refuse to do so, they are categorised as a social problem. Thus single motherhood, low-skilled employment, unemployment, anti-social behaviour and crime are perceived as particular problems associated with unsuccessful youth transitions, as problems of youth, even though it could be argued from a different perspective that such problems affect a wide range of ages and can be better explained with reference to the economy and to social structural inequalities such as class.

In contrast to the current situation, during the 1950s and 1960s for example, youth was thought of much more as a period of life to be celebrated and

enjoyed for its own sake. Young people were able to use opportunities opened up to them by increased affluence and increased access to educational and employment opportunities to create meanings for themselves. In doing so, they began to develop their own ideas about the type of society they wanted and to experiment with new ways of living. They stressed the importance of young people being with other young people and they sought freedom from responsibility, freedom to seek new experiences and knowledge, and freedom to experiment with new ways of living. In this environment, *being* young in itself was understood as more important than *becoming* adult and at the same time, the young people themselves were trying to forge new ways of thinking about what it meant to be adult, which often questioned the values and beliefs of the older generation.

This new way of thinking about youth became possible partly as consequence of the large numbers of young people relative to other age groups during the 1960s, and partly a consequence of their newly won economic power. The development of ideas about youth as a time to be enjoyed for itself, was influenced by the fact that large numbers of young people were freed, for the first time in British history, from the cares of poverty and from the responsibility of contributing towards helping to keep their families. The children born in the years during and immediately after the second world war had benefited from an extended period of relative peace. They had enjoyed the redistribution of social resources brought by the Welfare State which meant that they were healthier and better educated than ever before. They were experiencing technical and scientific innovations which heralded mass communication, opportunities for travel and a sexual freedom hitherto undreamed of. They could afford to ask questions about society and their place within it identifying increasingly with each other as young people, rather than with their parents. In this situation, 'youth' became a powerful social group, with its own developing ideas and culture.

Sociologists of the 1960s and 70s were often themselves young people and they questioned the sociology they had inherited as much as the society which it came from. They became interested in understanding youth subcultural groups such as the mods and rockers and the hippies, and in the meaning of youth culture, identified with rock music, clothes and fashion, political activity, drug-taking and sexual liberation because young people seemed to be creating a new society. In this context, the notion of 'transitions' was almost meaningless.

This essentially hedonistic approach to the idea of youth started to become shaky as the British economy wobbled during the 1970s, and it had come to an end by the early 1980s as youth unemployment soared. The power of the majority of young people was undermined as their spending power collapsed and they became more dependent upon their families and the state. Those young people who did well in these conditions did so, not by questioning

society, but by conforming and promoting conservative values. The 1980s were thus marked by a shift away from the idea of distinctive youth culture or cultures and 'sub-cultural' theories of youth towards renewed ideas about transition. Whereas subcultural theory presents young people centrally as creators and actors in their own destinies (CCCS, 1975; Willis, 1977), theories of transition emphasise the importance of processes and structures outside the control of young people in determining the conditions of their existence. In so doing, transitional theory is more directly relevant to policy decisions which shape the active choices of young people.

The tension between ideas of *being* and *becoming* is important for the development of policy and practice relating to young people and is a subject of continuing debate amongst commentators on youth issues (Jefferies and Smith, 1998/99; Davies, 2004). Yet these debates are only possible because there is a larger, overarching idea that youth is a social category which represents a particular group of people worthy of investigation. This idea is only possible as social forces create conditions in which young people occupy particular social spaces and status as youth.

Historical dimensions

Thinking about youth as a universal state of being with particular and common attributes emerged from the particular social and historical circumstances associated with the industrial revolution in Britain and other western societies. The development of industrial capitalism created a situation where social role and identity became increasingly dependent upon paid work. Previously, economic production was based upon agriculture and work was undertaken in the family with different members adopting different roles according to their age, gender and ability. In pre-industrial Europe, social relationships were defined by feudal rights and duties in which status and identity were fixed by relationships of birth and family. Young people expected to remain within the same social group as their parents and to learn the same work. Within this arrangement, which was one of interdependence rather than independence/dependence, age was not a significant indicator of social status.

In his classic text 'Centuries of Childhood', Philip Ariès (1965) describes and analyses the development of a conception of childhood as a state of being separate from, rather than continuous with adulthood. Ariès argued that in the middle ages in Europe, children were simply seen as small adults. This changed in the modern age when childhood began to be considered as a distinctive period of life with its own characteristics. To think of childhood as distinct from adulthood, begs the question of how children achieve adulthood and here the idea of 'youth'

as a period of change, of rupture, disruption, discontinuity and transition is born. Whilst the work of Ariès is rather too simple in its historical approach, it nevertheless provides a broad brush-stroke view of the manner in which age relations and the representations of youth changed as industrialisation took hold in Western Europe.

The modern understanding of youth as a period which bridges childhood and adulthood ultimately derives from the manner in which children, young people and adults have been separated into distinct groups. This has taken place within industrial workplace and through the separation of family and work and of education, family and work. In the feudal, pre-industrial productive unit centred upon home, field, and craft production, education, training and work and the division of labour within work was centred within the family. Here it was closely related to physical and mental maturity and capacity.

In contrast, in the world of wage labour and mass production, the ability to work had to be fitted more formally with mechanised systems of mass production. These required a division of labour based not upon individual strength, knowledge and ability, but upon the various tasks involved in making an object. Some of the new productive processes required a capacity to work long and hard hours. Others required high levels of skill and knowledge.

In adapting to the new situation, family, work, and education became separated into distinct social processes and institutions, serving different and specialised functions, but ultimately shaped in response to the requirement for maximising productivity, profit and wealth. The development of separate institutions reinforced differences of class, gender and age in particular. Generally, the family came to be seen as the place for 'unproductive' women with young children, the school as the place for the older child who must learn the skills needed for employment and family responsibilities, and the workplace became the dominant arena for adult men. The workforce in turn was segmented by class divisions associated with levels of education and skill.

From this very rough sketch of the complicated processes of industrialisation, it can be understood how men, women and children were separated with reference to different institutions and in relation to dependent and independent status. By the same token, it begins to become clear how young people could be understood as 'in transition' – from school to family for young women and from school to adult employment for young men. In this, the experiences of young men and young women, of all classes, were similar in that they inhabited a low paid rung in the labour market. However, they were distinct in that their futures would differ. Thus boys received higher wages than girls and boys were more likely to be offered higher or vocational education and training. These distinctions, though no longer formalised, remained clear in the British social structure well into the late twentieth century and can still be traced in

the decision making and choices as well as the opportunities offered to young people, despite equal opportunities policies and legislation.

With the development of the institutions associated with industrialisation and mass production, productive activity was no longer tied to the realities of the condition of any given individual. Instead it became standardised according to general criteria, particularly of gender and age. So, no matter that a strong healthy young woman could undertake work of equal or greater capacity than an ailing adult man, she was categorised into a narrow range of trades and lower wages because she was a woman and young. Standardised categories became increasingly written into law throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in defining the parameters of childhood, youth and adulthood. For example, the restrictive and protective legislation enacted in a series of Factories and Mines Acts specified regulation in relation to gender and age categories. This was reinforced as the state increasingly took responsibility for the provision of educational, health and welfare services, for example in determining the school-leaving age. Meanwhile, specific systems for dealing with childhood and youth questions, such as Juvenile Courts, were introduced as principles of justice were brought into line with the emerging sympathy for childhood and youth as distinctive stages of life.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the lives of all young people in Britain were constrained and directed by the organisational relationships between family, work and school. Within this triangle, childhood dependency is located within the family; generational identity is fostered within the school; and the achievement of adult independence is achieved through work. They are supplemented and supported by an edifice of juvenile justice arrangements organised to deal with young people who are unwilling or unable to conform to the expected behaviour or who break the social rules set within these institutions.

Spatial dimensions

The particular historical circumstances of industrialising Britain created a distinctly *modern* understanding of youth which emphasises a series of institutionally based 'discontinuities' between childhood and adulthood. A certain degree of discontinuity is recognised in most societies in relation to the onset of puberty and traditionally, this has been marked by 'coming of age' ceremonies where the moment of becoming adult is marked and recognised (Mead, 1961). Whilst they continue to loom large in the lives of young people in some pre-industrial contexts, in modern complex societies, such ceremonies have lost much of their significance. The achievement of adulthood in the contemporary world is mainly dominated by social rather than biological

development. In this social arena young people experience a wide range of different conditions and expectations.

In geographical and cultural space, the concept of youth and the experience of being young for the majority of young people in Britain today might be similar to the experiences of being young in other parts of the wealthy developed world. Young people who inhabit such a world have relatively easy access to the basic needs of life – to food and clothing, warmth and shelter. They can aspire to build upon their good fortune in this respect through education and training and hope in turn that this might provide access to a level of wealth and healthy adulthood undreamed of in other places. So even though 'youth' might be burdened with negative connotations associated with the risks of transition, if young people can navigate these risks successfully, they can hope for a positive future.

However, this bears very little relationship to being young in a poor, under-developed or conflict-torn environment. In an absolute sense, being young in Western Europe or North America must be a different experience from being young for example in Sudan, in the rain forests of South America or in Palestine. This is the case in any period of history but its significance is exacerbated by the extent of the inequalities of wealth and opportunity in the contemporary context of globalisation. Conditions of existence such as climate, war and peace, and environmental health facilitate or constrain access to resources and the type of resources available for everyone. This in turn impacts upon health, education and employment. In conditions of poverty or extreme social disruption, families do not have the luxury to accord special and distinct status to childhood. Children and young people are required to achieve independence, or to work to contribute to the processes of survival as soon as they are physically able. At the extremes, this might involve being sold into slavery, it might mean prostitution or abandonment on the streets, it might involve being kidnapped to join a military group, and at the very least can mean exploitative and disabling physical work. In such circumstances, ideas about the qualities or problems of 'youth' are virtually emptied of meaning. Young people are simply bodies and hands with particular physical capacities to be put to work.

The possibility of survival beyond mature adulthood and into a healthy 'third age' all favour the idea of youth as a period of preparation for a satisfying and fulfilled adulthood. In some parts of the world, this is not possible. Even surviving childhood and achieving young adulthood can be a remarkable achievement. For young people in societies where life expectancy is as low as forty, there can be no luxury of youth as a period of preparation. Youth must be used to the full in the here and now – whether that be in terms of working for a living or in terms of reproducing the next generation.

Circumstances in which the idea of youth as a separate and distinct stage of life loses meaning also afflict young people in the richer parts of the world.

Side by side with those undergoing recognised youthful 'transitions', exist those who are consigned to the margins, who in contemporary language are considered to be 'socially excluded'. Young people who live in pockets of poverty in the rich world often endure similar conditions to those in poorer places. For example Anuradha Vittachi (1989) describes conditions for 13 and 14 year old girls employed in a small workshop making shoes in Italy, where in a tiny enclosed space filled with the stench of glue, infested with rats and cockroaches, the girls are made chronically ill and left unfit for further work.

Poverty is a key determinant of the experience of youth all over the world. It is related to other structures of inequality such as 'race' or 'caste' which consign different groups to lesser social positions than others and in so doing force them into constrained and restricted spaces. In the circumstances of poverty, young people are more likely not only to become victims of exploitation which make youth almost meaningless, but also to participate in destructive activities or problematic behaviour which has connections with the dominant ideas about what it means to be young. So, for example, if youth is supposed to signify the achievement of independence and a young person sees no prospect of achieving such independence legitimately within their own environment, they turn to illegitimate means and move into spaces where they do not belong, where they are experienced by others as a threat. Crime might seem like an option towards the achievement of adulthood. This becomes particularly relevant in circumstances where young men are denied access to the paid employment which promises the achievement of adult status. In this way, particular groups of young people come to be defined as a particular problem for society. The emphasis is upon their youth because of ideas about the 'riskiness' of being young, but other factors are equally, if not more important.

The legal framework and the policy decisions associated with the concept of youth and which set the conditions under which youth is experienced, derive primarily from those who have greatest wealth and power in any given society. The further such definitions are from the realities of the lives of any given individual or any particular group of young people, the more likely that there will be a gap or conflict between expectations and achievement in relation to such young people. Differences in the experience and meanings attaching to youth therefore have consequences for the psychological and social development of young people. For example, if there is a gap between social expectation and achievement, the consequence might be low self esteem or disaffection amongst individuals and certain groups of young people. This need not necessarily be the result, but it is perhaps more likely if young people accept the given or inherited meanings.

Conclusion

Although the concept of youth seems to describe in a very straightforward way the period between childhood and adulthood, it is actually a highly complex notion. There is no necessary reason why 'youth' should be experienced as an 'in between' moment in life, or as a stage towards something else. In different times and places it becomes more or less irrelevant and is merely part of the seamlessness of growing older.

To understand youth as a period of transition, or a series of transitions, does help to understand the reality of the lives of some young people. However ideas about youth associated with transition or even with youth as a special period of freedom, refer to a distinctly modern experience which derived from industrialisation in the west. They do not adequately deal with the different conditions in different types of society. Nor do they distinguish between the different social worlds of young people living in the same geographical and historical space but experiencing very different circumstances. The here and now in which young people live is not just about being young, but about a whole range of personal and social circumstances and issues which can be equally, if not more important than age.

Insofar as law, policy and institutional arrangements situate young people in particular social locations, as young people, then there will be particular issues and experiences consequent upon being young. These create an awareness of generational differences and they frame the realities of life for everyone, not only the young people involved. Parents' lives are regulated by the school year and by the expectation that they might have to pay fees for university. The behaviour of young people who are involved in crime impacts upon their victims and has consequences for the overall idea of how youth are today. Thus youth is an important concept for understanding social relationships and for focusing upon particular groups. However, it is a concept which must be used critically and carefully if it is to be of value in understanding the lives of particular individuals and groups of young people.

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